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AGING-OUT YOUTH: AN INQUIRY INTO THE SOCIAL
WORKER/CLIENT RELATIONSHIP

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Melissa Jenon Myers

June 2006


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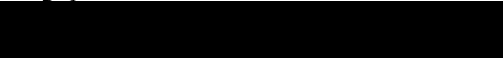
Approved by:



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6-9-06

Date



Janet Knipe, State Wide Coordinator,
California Youth Connection,



Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

This study examines the topic of youth preparedness to age out by focusing on the positive aspects of the social worker/client relationship. The sample consisted of current and former foster care youth, which participated in two consecutive focus group sessions. Session data was transcribed and then analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory approach to qualitative research. The data reveal that what youth perceive as positive relationships with their social workers embodies qualities such as interpersonal communication, concern for feelings and recognition of individual needs. Also revealed by the study are the characteristics of high quality service provided by the social worker as identified by youth, namely competence and responsiveness to individual needs. This study provides an in-depth look at youths' perceptions, but due to a small sample size, the study may not be representative of all foster youth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the youth involved in California Youth Connection for their participation in this project and for their strength and dedication in furthering foster youth rights and Janet Knipe, M.S., State Wide Coordinator, California Youth Connection, for her support of this project. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Laurie Smith for her support and guidance through the completion of this project.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my mom
Linda Nelson, and daughter, Alexa Garcia, for your love
and support and to all who have been on this journey with
me (you know who you are), Thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Children who become adolescents while in foster care may eventually arrive at adulthood by way of the child welfare system. Children and adolescents entering the child welfare system have usually been through traumatic events leading up to their removal, are traumatized from being taken from their family of origin and, unfortunately, often experience even more trauma as a result of being a part of the child welfare system. Occurring at the same time are the biological and psychosocial stages that, even in a secure familial environment, can be tumultuous for an adolescent.

Over half a million children live in foster care in America, and 90,000 are aged 16 to 18 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). The issues these youth are facing include adapting to the environment in which they find themselves, be it long-term foster care, residential/group facility care, or independent living arrangements, and successfully gaining the skills, support and inner resources necessary to move into young

adulthood and self-sufficiency. To acquire a better understanding of these issues and establish best practices to respond to the needs of this population, research in the area of social worker and client relationships, specifically what aspects of these relationships is working, is essential to inform practice and policy.

Attachment and developmental models help identify the areas in which adolescents require support during this stage and, by using a strengths-based approach to collecting data, promotion of better outcomes for the transition from traumatized adolescents to self-sufficient young adults is possible.

Practice Context

According to Mech (1988), the environment required for shaping strong, self-sufficient young adults consists primarily of "...protection, affection, encouragement and intimate contact associated with normal family life," (Mech, introduction, xi). With this in mind, when we examine an adolescent's experience of growing up as part of an agency and not part of a family, it stands to reason that, as well as overcoming the trauma of a difficult past, they must compensate for inadequate

support during an important stage in their growth. This issue does not just effect the youth in question, but also society at large, because without acquiring the skills necessary for their success, failure is imminent. This failure is evidenced by burgeoning costs to the welfare system by way of increased involvement of these youth in the judicial, mental health and social service systems.

Percentages of youth who have emancipated from foster care that end up incarcerated are significant (Barth, 1990). This phenomenon can be explained as an institutionalization process. Youth growing up in the child welfare system who are unable to adjust to adult life are continuing his or her institutionalized adolescence, thus perpetuating the cycle of dependency. This cycle can be halted by expanding our knowledge as social work professionals to aid us in advocating both on an individual level and at a policy level where emancipating youths' experience of the system can be improved to facilitate better outcomes.

The role of social worker in this process can be defined by the generalist practice model, which encompasses "a broad range of methods to intervene with

various systems sizes, including individuals, groups, organizations, and communities" (Popple & Leighninger, 2002, p. 119). Two interrelated concepts associated with the generalist practice model are "strengths perspective" and "empowerment." Both theoretical perspectives identify client strengths and stress a client's unique repertoire of innate coping skills and adaptive abilities while incorporating environmental resources in interventions (Popple & Leighninger, 2002, p. 119). These perspectives are in keeping with child welfare practice and were applied to the social worker as well as the client in this research. The child welfare social worker is the gate keeper of services for youth in foster care and would be well-served to understand the perceived qualities and skills they possess that are instrumental in supporting a client through the process of becoming an adult in the system. An appreciative inquiry into this relationship is an innovative approach to the examination of the empowerment process.

Policy Context

As we examine the course of an adolescent's life through the lens of the child welfare system, we find many areas in their care that warrant careful

consideration and leave a lot to be desired when attempting to achieve the outcomes of safety, permanency and well-being. This is especially true as it relates to youth on their way to young adulthood, in the process known as "aging out." Policies significantly affecting emancipating youth began with the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. This act was passed to address foster care "drift" and to move children and youth through the system to permanency in a timely manner, but did not address issues of preparation for independent living for foster care youth approaching emancipation (Festinger, 1983).

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 was established to amend the existing legislation and increase funding to encompass a larger range of services for this population. As a result, the name was changed to The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). With this change five objectives were established to transmit the goals of safety, permanency and well being for these youth. These objectives are: (1) To identify children who are expected to be in foster care through the age of 18 who will age out of the system; (2) To provide education, training and services, which have been identified as

necessary for this transition; (3) To prepare these youth for entrance into post-secondary training in educational institutions; (4) To provide personal and emotional support for aging out youth and (5) Provide a wide range of services to support former foster care youth recipients between the ages of 18-21 years in conjunction with the youths' effort to achieve self sufficiency (Collins, 2004).

These services are evaluated through outcome studies, of which there are many. However, few studies are oriented to what is going right with the program. Policy and best practices continue to emerge from these evaluative studies and as Hegar and Hunzekar surmise, "empowerment based practice is both little used and badly needed" in the child welfare system, especially as it relates to this population (Hegar & Hunzekar, 1988).

Purpose of this Study

This research study was mainly concerned with this population's experience of the child welfare system through identification of the positive aspects of their interaction with their social workers. This relationship between social worker and client was examined by using a

phenomenological approach combined with grounded theory in attachment and psychosocial development. The intent of this study was to inform the researcher of what areas can be expanded and or maintained in order to insure the success of the aging-out process.

In addition, this study incorporated the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) method of research, which provided a strengths-based approach for creating a positive change for both the social worker and the aging-out youth population by capitalizing on the constructive interactions between the two and using these aspects to build a basis for positive change in the future.

This approach has been chosen for this project since an abundance of traditional, problem-solving research already exists that puts the focus on the breakdown rather than the strengths of the system. Cooperrider observed, as cited by Barnes (2005), "a compulsive concern with what is not working, why things go wrong, who didn't do his or her job, demoralizes members of the organization, reduces the speed of learning, and undermines relationships and forward movement."

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as identified by its developer, David Cooperrider and cited by Finegold (2002), "begins with the discovery of the highest achievements, core values, and aspirations embedded in all human systems. It is a methodology that begins a dialogue between individuals, expands to groups and builds to embrace and declare community wide intentions and actions" [Finegold, abstract].

It was anticipated that, throughout the research process, themes and linkages would be discovered to foster a deeper understanding of the particular aspects of the aging-out youths' experiences they perceived as beneficial. The aspects of the social worker/client relationship that are perceived as positive need to be recognized and enhanced in order to improve the environment for aging-out youth and to better support social work practice as a whole.

This was a qualitative research study. The qualitative approach to the topic of youth preparedness to age out by focusing on the positive aspects of the social worker/ client relationship provided an in-depth look at the perceptions and attitudes toward this process by the youth themselves. By using the inductive process

of knowledge attainment, guided by appreciative inquiry principles, the aim was to further the expressed strengths associated with the interaction between social workers and their emancipating clients.

Significance of the Study for Social Work Practice

The results of this research study will inform direct practice by providing a positive approach to the issues of social worker involvement in preparing these youth for emancipation by emphasizing the techniques, procedures and performances that enhance successful emancipation rather than those that are more problematic. This will shift the paradigm from problem -to solution consideration by the social workers during the planning and implementation processes of the adolescents' transition from state dependents to self-sufficient adults.

This research project is relevant to child welfare practice by providing valuable insight into the planning and implementation phase of servicing this population. As mentioned above, this research is guided by current child welfare policy as it relates to aging out youth and will inform child welfare practitioners as to the aspects of

practice that are currently serving this population well. It is the hope of this researcher that by taking a strengths-based approach to evaluating the social worker/client relationship it will create a climate that engenders collaboration, discussion and cooperation between social workers and their clients, as well as their peers and policy makers.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Out of the 500,000 children in foster care in the U.S., 19,008 youth aged out in 2001 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). It is important to note that these youth make up 4% of adoption eligible children, but only 2% actually make it through the adoption process (U.S. department of Health and Human Services, 2003). In other words, many of these youth are in out-of-home care, residing primarily in group or foster homes until they age-out without the promise of permanent ties to a family.

As much of the research on this subject follows the needs-based research approach of Mech (1994), literature presented here will identify three areas considered essential to the development of youth as they age out which are: support networks, emotional and behavioral issues and educational and life skills, policy affecting this issue and services designed to promote successful transitions. In addition, Strengths Perspective and

Empowerment theories are applied to this study in the context of best practices for the aging out population.

Support Networks

For adolescents in placement, their foster families, or if in a group home, staff and counselors, as well as their social workers, therapists, schools and community, and birth family if appropriate, can be identified as support networks. As cited by Loman and Siegel (2000), many foster youth rely on their family of origin or extended family after placement. These relationships, tenuous or not, may be a viable option for support for aging out youth due to the youths decreased dependence on the family. This should not be overlooked when planning for emancipation (Courtney & Barth, 1996). Adoption for this population should not be overlooked either. If adoption were not possible, then identifying people who can serve as a family resource for the aging out youth would be appropriate in providing for their needs of permanent connections (Fahlberg, 1991).

An Independent Living outcome study done by Mallon showed 96% of youths in his study had established at least one strong friendship. Also in the study youth

identified social supports by three groups: (a) family, relatives and friends; (b) community resources and (c) agency services after youth leave care. He concluded in his study that long term individualized plans are essential to the continued success of these youth (Mallon, 1998). So whether the foster families, agencies, or communities provide it, ongoing connections must be established to ensure the well being of aging out youth.

Emotional and Behavioral Issues

The emotional and psychosocial stages of development as indicated by Erikson place these youth in the crises of Identity vs. Role Confusion and Intimacy vs. Isolation respectively. In achieving Identity vs. Role Confusion, an adolescent must integrate earlier identifications, current values and future goals into a consistent self-concept (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004). Following this stage is the quest for intimacy that must be achieved in order to avoid isolation. Intimacy is defined as the ability to share with and give to another without sacrificing one's own identity (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004). It is questionable whether children in the child welfare system are provided with the care, nurturing and

autonomy required to adequately navigate these stages so integral to their developing maturity.

Loss of the significant family of origin relationships due to the reasons for youth entering the system, i.e., abuse and neglect, precipitate how attachment will play a major role in the way these youth develop interpersonal relationships and how they deal with loss in the future. Children may arrive in the system with already established attachment issues, which can be exacerbated by multiple placements and the foster families or placement's inability to identify and attend to these issues (Fahlberg, 1991). The symptoms of attachment disorder manifest as severe behavioral and emotional problems and are magnified during adolescence. Early assessment and intervention are essential to accurately place these children in therapeutic foster placements in order to provide corrective attachment therapy and parenting (Levy & Orlans, 1998).

The outcomes related to these psychosocial and emotional issues are: increased placements, less opportunity for attachment and prolonged dependency. A study done by Reilly (2003) illustrates how the lack of permanency affects this population. This study included

100 emancipated youth who were interviewed six months post emancipation. Their reports indicated that youth who had several placements prior to emancipation were significantly more likely to have encountered violence in their dating relationships, had more trouble with the law, were more likely to have spent time in jail, had higher rates of pregnancy and were significantly more likely to be homeless after leaving foster care (Reilly, 2003).

Education and Life Skills

Studies show that a lack of educational attainment in foster care youth can be attributed to educational neglect prior to entering the child welfare system, emotional and behavioral problems conflicting with the learning process and an interruption in education by multiple placements. Independent Living Programs (ILP's) are primarily concerned with these variables as it pertains to youth aging out. A landmark research study performed by Westat in 1991, cited by Casey Family Programs (2001), states that 2/3 of youth aging out of the system did not receive a high school diploma and 61% had no job related experience. A follow up study by

Westat indicated that fewer than one in five participants were self-supporting a year after emancipation.

The ability to shop, budget, maintain employment and housing, and complete college or vocational training characterize life skills. These skills are generally learned in a traditional family, informally. However, the circumstances in the lives of foster care youth have prevented this from naturally occurring. These skills are lacking in the same way educational skills are not adequate in this population to secure a future.

Policy Addressing the Needs of Foster Care Youth

These areas of concern (social support, emotional and psychosocial issues and educational and life skills achievement) have been addressed legislatively by the formation of The Federal Independent Living Program, (ILP), in 1986 and The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which renamed the Independent Living Program as the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP). These acts were designed to tackle the problem of ill-equipped transitioning foster care youth by providing funding sources and guidelines for what is required of federal, state and local agencies in facilitating change. The

CFCIP for example, designates funds to the state and it is up to the discretion of the state as to how it can be best spent to assist foster youth with services such as career exploration, vocational training, counseling and job placement (Sherman, 2004). Hence, social workers full assessment of the individual needs of youth in collaboration with the youth to determine what is needed to help them become successful adults would be beneficial to inform local agencies where funds would be efficiently utilized.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and an understanding of Attachment theory and how these youth are affected by attachment issues (as addressed earlier in this review) explain the psychosocial aspects of the youth in foster care and the issues that coincide with the age restrictions placed on care in the child welfare system.

Much of the research available on the issues surrounding aging out youth focus on the outcomes of Independent Living Programs and there seems to be a lack of information on the relationships helping these youth

acquire the coping skills, as well as, the instrumental skills necessary for the transition, that seems for many youth, to come too soon. A few studies reveal how disempowered this population is in regards to the values of self-determination and agency (Hegar & Hunzeker, 1988). By using Strengths and Empowerment theories as a basis for practicing social work with this population, and as applied to this study, strategies to move beyond powerlessness may emerge.

Summary

An overview of literature was presented here describing areas where aging out youth are most vulnerable. The areas of focus for this study are support networks, emotional and behavioral issues, and education and life skills attainment. Also included in this review was policy addressing these issues.

Most of the literature reviewed for this study is based on research evolving from Mech's studies in the 1980's and is needs-based research. There is a lack of qualitative research on the relationships that help aging out youth transition from state dependents to self-sufficient adults.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Presented in this section are the study design, sampling, data collection, procedures and the protection of human subjects. In addition, an overview of the study is provided, as well as an explanation as to the relevance of using a qualitative approach to this research subject.

Study Design

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the client, i.e., emancipated youth, and the social workers who were involved with their care throughout the process known as aging out. By using a qualitative approach to explore these relationships, it is hoped that themes will emerge that may guide future social work practice with youth toward more positive outcomes.

A qualitative approach is relevant to this area of study because it allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of this relationship by capturing the experiences of a few youth, in their own voices, sharing.

their own perceptions of a shared experience. In addition, from this researcher's past experience with this population, group sharing has been identified as the preferred method of disclosure; therefore, a focus group is an ideal environment for this research study to occur. Five participants were recruited to take part in the first focus group and seven were available to participate in the second group.

The limitations of this study design were such that the small sample size, as well as, utilizing a snowball sampling may not have produced data representative of the total population of former foster care youth. Also, as in any data collected by way of self reports, social desirability bias could lead to less reliable data. Interviewer influence is another limitation to keep in mind when gathering data in this manner and was a consideration by this researcher throughout the focus group process.

Sampling

The sample for this study, a non-probability snowball sampling, was obtained from youth through the California Youth Connection. Participants were recruited

until the day of the meetings in order to obtain as many participants in the focus groups as possible. Eligible participants were current foster care youth, who were in the process of ageing out of the program, and former foster care youth, who had aged out of the child welfare system. This group of participants was preferred for this research study because they were 18 yrs, or older, and did not require consent from the state to participate in this study. Food and transportation were provided as incentives to participate in this study.

Sampling Criteria

The only sampling criteria employed in this study were that the participants must be current or former foster care youth, 18 yrs, or older and affiliated with the California Youth Connection. No gender or ethnicity restrictions were applied in this research study.

Data Collection and Instruments

In this study, the researcher collected data by way of two focus group meetings, which were held on April 5 and 6, 2006. The format for these groups utilized an unstructured forum with a few guiding questions, chosen to aid in the appreciative inquiry focus of this

research, however, content was generated by the group.
See Appendix C for Interview Guide.

The researcher/facilitator posed the questions in an open-ended manner, thereby facilitating the group interaction. Areas that were covered in the groups were: What experiences did the recently emancipated youth have with their social workers during the aging out process? Were they positive? What recommendations or suggestions could they offer the researcher?

The sessions were tape-recorded and the recordings were transcribed for further analysis by the researcher.

Procedures

A letter of intent was sent to Janet Knipe, Director of California Youth Connection requesting approval and support of this study, which was received on January 25, 2006. Through on-going contacts, participation in-group meetings, the researcher built relationships with the youth members, in the Riverside Chapter of CYC, this included participation in an adult-supporter training session on December 9, 2005. As a guest at the meetings, I began and continued the process of introducing my

project to group members in order to recruit participants.

After the desired number of participants for two separate focus groups was identified, the participants were invited to attend one of two separate focus group meetings on two successive days in April. Meeting space, food and transportation were arranged. Following the focus group sessions, participants were asked if they could be contacted at a later date should follow up become necessary. After the focus groups were conducted, the recordings were transcribed and the data analysis and synthesis of the material was performed.

Protection of Human Subjects

Every precaution was taken to protect the confidentiality of the participants contributing to this research study. Informed consent was obtained prior to the focus group sessions and debriefing was provided for participants after the focus groups concluded. See Appendices A & B. Recorded group data will be stored and analyzed by this researcher in a manner not to be accessible to others not involved in this study and after

the study is completed all materials will be destroyed in a confidential manner.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this research utilized qualitative analysis techniques. Initially, recorded data obtained from the focus group sessions was transcribed verbatim. The research journal was utilized throughout the data collection and analysis processes, as well as any other written material pertinent to this process. A coding method to organize data by specific content was applied to the transcripts. An additional level of coding was also applied to the data to refine the analysis and to represent the more abstract concepts that emerged from this data. Copious notes have been taken as a means of self-evaluation of the researcher's reactions throughout this data analysis process in the attempt to maintain value awareness.

Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the methodology used in this research study. Qualitative data collection and analysis were discussed as well as study design, sampling and consideration for the human subjects

involved in this research. Relevance of the use of a qualitative approach to this research subject was established and the researcher's dedication to self-evaluation as a means to maintain value awareness throughout this process was noted.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This research study was originally developed to utilize the Appreciative Inquiry model as a way to discover the youths' perceptions of the positive aspects of their experiences with their social workers. However, it became clear at the onset of the initial focus group that the majority of these youth had experienced a prior inquiry, which they had perceived as an attempt to control their responses to produce a desired result. Thus, it was necessary to change the focus of the inquiry somewhat, with the researcher focusing on extracting the positive aspects of the subject, while allowing the youth to be free to discuss both the positive and the negative aspects of their experiences.

Chapter Four includes an in-depth presentation of the results of this research study. Qualitative data analysis was used to define the codes representing the focus group participants' responses during the group meetings. The codes were then grouped into categories that represent direct or indirect value to the study

results and the central premise of the study. The coding system and the conclusions drawn from the analysis are also included in this chapter, which then concludes with a summary.

Demographic Characteristics of Sample

The participants of the two focus groups had various experiences within the child welfare system that spanned from 2 months to 16 years. These youth had all experienced multiple placements, including foster care, group homes, relative placement and guardianship. All of the participants had also had interactions with numerous social workers during the time they were in care. As gender bias was not an issue here and there were no restrictions or preferences relating to gender when recruiting the focus group members, the gender makeup for Group A was 2 female and 3 male participants, while there were 5 females and 2 males in Group B. Both groups were ethnically diverse, represented by Caucasian, African American, Latino, Samoan and Native American ethnicities. Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 24 years of age.

Presentation of the Findings

The procedural aspects of the focus groups were as follows: a short introduction of the process was followed by a basic statement of the goal of the study and the possible future application of the results. The topic was stated and the procedure was audio taped in its entirety. The audio tapes were transcribed verbatim, which resulted in 17 pages of narrative for Group A and 14 narrative pages for Group B. This produced a total of 31 pages of combined narrative. The transcribed data was then analyzed, assigned codes using open coding (see Table 1), which were further analyzed utilizing the axial coding method in order to categorize the coded concepts to aid in refining the analysis to extract the data pertinent to the central premise and connect the themes that emerged from the narratives (see Table 2).

Table 1. Codes

| | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Interpersonal Communication | Concern for clients' Feelings | Patience |
| Information Communication | Resiliency | Scripted Responses |
| Empowerment | Open-mindedness | Understanding |
| Compassion | Empathy | Avoidance of priorities |
| Respect | Punishment | Inattentive |
| Competence | Strength | Advocacy |
| Judgmental | Takes into account individual needs | Competent |
| Non-Judgmental | Personalization | Trust/or lack of |
| Recognition of Change in Client | Encouraging Self-Sufficiency | Job Satisfaction |

Table 1 contains 2 codes that were extracted from the narratives by "open coding" techniques. These codes represent concepts, attitudes and qualities noted by the participants relevant to either their own experience and/or the relational experiences with social workers, both effective and ineffective. For example, one of the youth relating his perception of the most important quality of an effective social worker stated,

I think, in order to be a social worker, I think one of the job requirements should be compassion...I just have one word for the

candidates who read this that are going to become social workers, compassion, that's it, that's all it takes.

This statement reflects this participant's belief that compassion is the most important quality a social worker can possess. In fact, this participant feels it should be a prerequisite for anyone involved in the profession. Compassion was chosen as a code due to its appearing as a reoccurring theme in other responses and was placed in a more general category of high quality services. During the next stage of the coding process, the 27 initial codes were similarly compared as in the example above and placed in one of the four categories as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Major Categories

| Categories | Codes |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Positive Relationships with Social Workers | Interpersonal Communication Understanding Respect Open-Mindedness Show concern for feelings Empowerment Insight Advocacy |
| High Quality Services Provided by Social Workers | Competence Job Satisfaction Compassion Advocacy Recognition of Change in Clients' Attitudes Structure Encouraging Self-sufficiency Takes into account individual needs Personalization |
| Negative Relationships with Social Workers | Judgmental Punishment Lack of Trust |
| Low Quality Services Provided by Social Workers | Non-responsiveness Scripted Lack of Communication Avoidance of Priorities High Caseloads |
| Youth Resiliency | Resiliency Strength |
| Mediating Factors | Negative experience of foster care environment |

Analysis of the data produced these 6 categories:
Positive Relationships with Social Workers; High Quality Services Provided by Social Workers; Negative Relationships with Social Workers; Low Quality Services

Provided by Social Workers, Youth Resiliency and Mediating Factors. The coded concepts, ideas and qualities were placed in the categories according to the perceived meanings of the youths' communication. The first category, Positive Relationships with Social Workers, was chosen because this is the basis for the focus group and the guiding question of the study. The concept was introduced to the participants during the introduction and was revisited throughout the group interaction. The second category, High Quality Services by Social Workers, emerged during the dialog and was addressed at the closing of the focus groups by the question, "If you had a group of social workers sitting in front of you, asking, what is it that I can do in my job to help make life better for you, what would it be?" This question, or a version of this question, was asked of both focus groups and elicited various responses, which were placed in this category.

The next two categories, Negative Relationships with Social Workers and Low Quality Services Provided by Social Workers, were derived completely from the youths' perceptions of the negative aspects of their relationships with social workers in particular and with

the child welfare system in general. The final category, Resiliency, was emergent from the dialog pertaining to how these youth, placed in at risk situations, found the strength within themselves, despite the circumstances and the negative aspects of their experiences, to develop and maintain positive attitudes toward life.

Positive relationships with social workers developed from the narrative and were described by the youth as:

She would come once, twice, three times a month and on certain weekends when my (foster) family traveled, she would actually let me spend the night at her house and we would go jet skiing. I would go fishing with her and her husband and her kids and stuff like that. She was really a cool person.

I like my worker right now (current social worker); she's going to be in the room with me when I have my second son. I mean that is how close we are. I mean I go to the beach with her and her daughters, I'm...it's like we have a relationship...

...It did seem like she was trying to make an honest effort.

I have one social worker _____, and she's my favorite. She always gets the job done. She's like wonderful.

But I have had like one social worker out of all the social workers I've had that has been like doing her job and I know that she cares, you know, I know she cares.

...She is definitely someone I look up to...I mean we've got like that friendship, but we've also got the, you know, she's been able to keep that boundary of social worker. I know that if I have a problem and even (when it is personal) I can still talk to her about it because she's there to understand and be your all...

Like with _____ we would talk about personal things, nothing that was inappropriate, but, you know, about he and his wife's honeymoon, or what he had for dinner that night, and that they were trying to have a baby and what they would name it and I got to know him as a person and I felt comfortable opening up to him because he wasn't a robot. I think that is the difference between good and bad social workers.

You don't get social workers like _____ very often and when you do, it's...he can like have an entire case load of kids and still make it to meetings and pretends, or is actually very happy to see us.

I didn't know how to cook a friggen hot dog and _____ gave me her personal phone number-this was when I first got out and I couldn't cook a hot dog, let alone macaroni and cheese. The whole point of the story is that she took the time and to actually put her neck out to do it. You know you don't get social workers like that very often.

...we just built up a wall against them and somehow they broke it down and somehow they stuck by us and here we are. That was the best thing we could ever have.

As these excerpts from the narrative implied, what the youth perceived as positive relationships with their social workers had to do with the social worker's interpersonal skills and ability to build relationships with the youth. This also included, in some cases, pushing the boundaries of the typical relationship to

include "being there" by being available outside the confines of monthly contacts and telephone calls. As these excerpts indicate, some of the youth thought of their social workers as friends and others saw them as mentors.

Other qualities that the youth perceived as positive had to do with their social worker's ability to "break down the walls" that these youth develop as defense mechanisms against the circumstances in their lives that are out of their control. This was achieved by the social workers use of insight, non-judgment and by having respect for the youths' feelings.

Empowerment emerged as a code as it applied to youth being introduced to the California Youth Connection and as it applied to the social worker's successful engagement with their youth clients:

That's when we came back (from a meeting) with this poster of our rights and we posted it on the wall.

That's the reason we come...we get to change the things that we didn't have and give it to other people (pertaining to foster youth rights).

...the things they knew we could get on our own, they would leave it to us. Because when we come out of group home it's like a sense of pride.

When you hear social workers bragging about one of 'my kids' (you get happy because they say 'my kid' and not 'this group home kid') 'is going to graduate and I get to be there.' All the other social workers will be like, well, why can't I do that? Then they are going to try to get their goals to help (their) kids succeed in life because all they (the kids) need is a little push.

High quality services were described by one participant as; "They kept all three of us together," as he explained the reason he was "ok" with being placed in a group home because he would be able to stay in close contact with his brothers. This denotes competence by the social worker's ability to take into account the individual needs of the youth and to arrange the necessary services to meet their needs.

Advocacy by the social worker on behalf of the youth was represented here as well, but, by and large, as it

pertained to the instrumental aspects of the social worker's relationship with their clients and this was represented as:

...getting right down to what you need...you need your transcripts they got them, you need clothes, you need money, a phone card, you need to talk to your parents, you got it.

What do you need, write it on a list and call me. That's what she did. She called every month; she made sure my brothers were all right...she called every single one of us on the same night.

I've met like some (social workers) that brought us military bags to pack our stuff in (instead of trash bags) and actually offered us to go to eat because we had a long drive. She got me a good foster home...it was really nice, in a good area.

Whenever I call she's always right there and if she doesn't answer her phone she calls me back. She always gets whatever paperwork I need done. She makes sure I get newsletters and things like that.

Conversely, the category "Low Quality Services Provided by Social Workers" also applied to the instrumental aspects of the relationship and youths' needs not being met. This was demonstrated by the youth as:

The main reason he's (referring to his brother) messed up in school and dropped out and is bad right now is because a social worker never paid attention to his transcripts. So he lost that and basically lost everything.

I mean there were a couple of times I literally got my social worker in trouble because instead of calling them, I would call their boss, because I would leave tons of messages and they would never call me back; so I would be like, you know, "Let me talk to your manager."

(Another youth in response to this comment)

That's basically what they have to do on a regular basis, is to be in touch with supervisors, because it is like pulling teeth to get timely responses from social workers, so I think that is pretty common.

Other aspects of the social worker/client relationship considered to be low quality services from the youths' perspective were:

scripted communication:

It's just a mandatory thing they have to do. You can totally hear it in their voice. Like they have a script in front of their face, like this and this and that, and they go in order, so their done. They sound all frustrated when they are doing it.

lack of communication:

...she never called; I mean I was like there for three months and she never really called. I got a call about two days before I was getting moved, again.

The other codes in this category, Avoidance of Priorities and High Caseloads, were reoccurring observations by several of the participants, especially high case loads. The youth are aware of the demands placed on social workers and one youth in particular indicating that this is why she will not consider becoming a social worker. She stated she would "tell them

(the agency), this is enough. I won't take any more cases because I can't give (them) the attention they need."

Low quality services were the focus of the youths' awareness of their "negative relationships with social workers"; however, it was also apparent by the youth's reports of feeling judged and feeling as if they were being punished by their social workers rather than being helped and supported by them also contributed to this category. In these instances the youth felt that there was "no relationship with social workers." These codes were drawn from a female youth's account of her male social worker's perceived bias towards women:

...he thought women should be seen and not heard and he didn't like the fact that I had an opinion and that I was, you know, I wanted to go to college, he was, you have to go into the Navy where I can keep you in the system. He withdrew my visits from my mother and my mother's response, she had a hissy fit and killed herself-she stopped taking her medication.

Other youth's experiences of punishment were:

He was very intimidating...he told me all the time, if you don't go to school, he was going to take his belt off and and whip your neh, neh, neh- I'm like dang, you ain't my daddy. If you didn't do what he wanted he just turned, it was like he was two-faced, he turned out to be a devil.

Lack of trust was also indicative of negative relationships as indicated by the following statements by two of the youth:

I had the biggest problems with the foster workers believing me because I had been placed in so many different homes that something wasn't right and the agency didn't catch (it) when they were doing their initial thing. That my social workers were like, they never believed me. Everything that happened that was bad to me, they were all, you're just saying that!

The last code, which evolved as a category because several times throughout the narrative a youth would finish talking about something that they perceived as a negative aspect of their experience in foster care with;

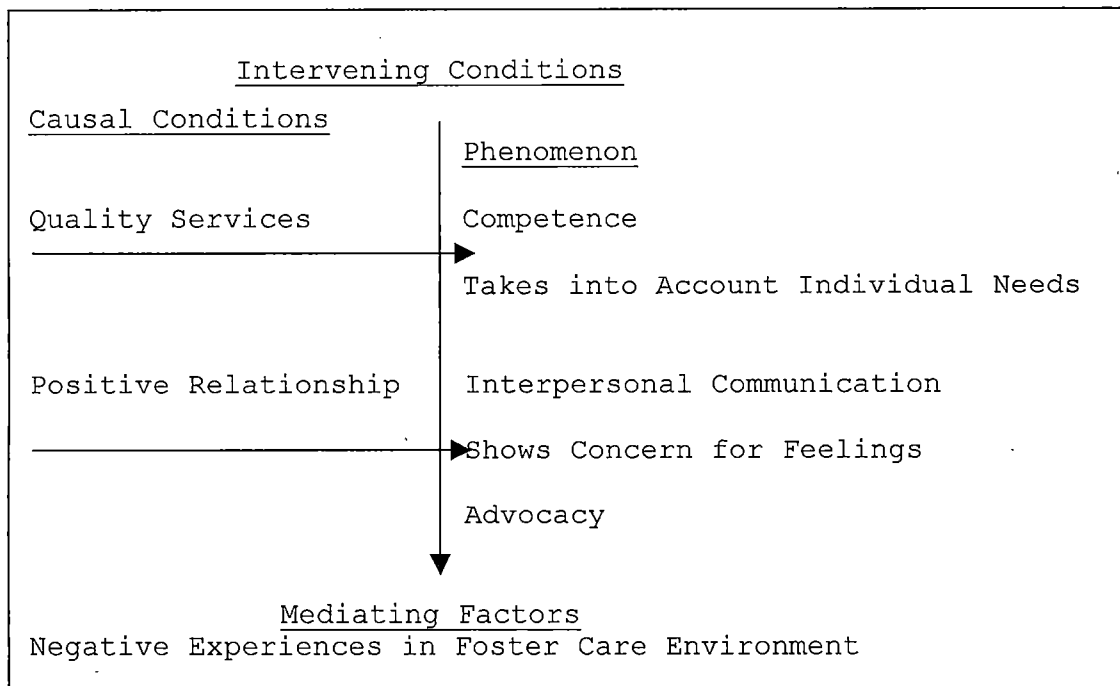
" I try to look on the positive side," or "I've learned that everything will turn out alright," is resiliency. In addition, there was a consensus in Group A that the situations that brought them into the system and the negative aspects of the system itself have made them stronger people.

The last category, Mediating Factors, refers to the experiences the youth had while involved in the child welfare system and how these experiences affected their perceptions of their relationships with their social workers. There appeared to be a consensus among the youth of both focus groups that a negative experience in one of the other areas, e.g. foster or group home care, skewed their perception of the social worker/client relationship even if positive, toward the negative. In other words, a negative experience in one area of the system apparently tainted the whole experience.

Organizing the categories, in order to create meaningful connections, which according to (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) involves "phenomenon," "conditions," and "interactional strategies," to help identify what the data is referring to, the action/interaction of the categories, the causal conditions, and the intervening

conditions that inhibit or promote the phenomenon. The connections made by this process appear in Table 3. According to Strauss and Corbin, (1990), applying "axial coding," allows the researcher to recognize the connections between the categories in order to make a theoretical statement correlating the information gathered from the focus groups, after the initial analysis using the "open coding" technique.

Table 3. Axial Coding



Summary

Chapter Four reviewed the results extracted from the focus group sessions. Data was transcribed and extracted

into codes. Codes were then grouped and designated into categories which gave meaning to the data in order to form some conclusions related to the youths' experience of their social workers. This study's results indicate that although many negative aspects of the social worker/client relationship exist, the youth were able to identify factors of their relationships with social workers that were positive. The study also provided insight into what the youth perceive as high quality services provided by social workers and that there is a direct correlation between the these two categories.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter Five includes a presentation of the conclusions gleaned from the results of this study and a discussion of the implications for social work policy and practice are also provided. This chapter concludes with a section on limitations and a summary.

Discussion

The aim of this project was to explore and give a voice to current and former foster care youth regarding aspects of their relationships with their social workers that they perceived as positive. The youth in both focus groups were eager to share their experiences, both positive and negative and the experience proved empowering for both the youth and this researcher. The youth involved in the focus groups, through their candid and eager responses during the dialogs, provided the insight and perception necessary for this researcher to draw certain specific and general conclusions regarding the experience of foster care in general and for these youth in particular.

The central theme that appears again and again, like a leitmotif, throughout the narrative data as it relates to the positive relationships between the participants and their social workers is that of compassion, dedication to task and connection. This research indicates that there is a direct correlation between perceived high quality services from a social worker by their client and a positive relationship between the two. However, the perception of high or acceptable quality of service for the social worker can exist, even if there is no positive relationship established between the two, if the social worker can be trusted to follow through with the necessary actions to provide the client with his/her basic needs and requests.

It is apparent from the research results that the youth have different ideas as to what they might need on a personal level from a social worker; however, they all agree that, on a professional level, they need someone who will perform their duties as promised, obtain necessary goods and services for them and advocate for their rights when necessary. Whether or not the youth need a more personal relationship with the social worker appears to depend upon several conditional factors.

One of the foremost of the conditional factors is the personality of the client. The next conditional factor in importance seems to be whether or not there is another mentor-like role model in their lives, with whom they have been able to make a bond. The implication was that this influence could be a family member, a foster care giver, or the social worker herself. The focus group participants implied that an important quality of a good social worker is the insight to assess whether or not a more personal level of involvement is required for the individual youth.

Although it was apparent from the results of the data that, even though the client/social worker relationship is a critical aspect in whether or not the ageing out process is a positive one, the client's total experience in the child welfare system is inextricably interconnected with their perspectives of the experience. A positive experience with an engaged social worker, while beneficial to the client in many ways, does not necessarily offset a negative experience with other agencies, e.g., foster care, group home care, and ILP services.

Limitations

Limitations of this study begin with the most obvious factor, a small, non-probability sample that was not necessarily representative of all foster youths' experiences with their social workers. Ideally, time permitting, more focus group sessions and follow up interviews would produce more solid data upon which to base stated conclusions. Further qualitative research on youths' perceptions combined with a quantitative component would produce more substantive and reliable data.

Another limitation of the study was the structure of the focus groups. The focus groups were designed with minimal structure in order to encourage the youth to freely express themselves through a creative dialog with out restriction. Inherent in this environment is the possibility for unforeseen direction in the content of the data.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Overall, this study identified areas of social work practice that youth consider vital when working with emancipating youth and suggest that the more competent

the social worker the more the youth perceive their experience with the child welfare system as positive. This relates to providing social workers with youth trainings to enhance their social work practice to engender better social worker/client relationships. In addition, the more awareness a youth social worker has regarding youths' rights the better they will be at serving this population.

Until recently, including youth in the decision making process regarding issues of placement, permanency and life skills was not a component of the social worker/client relationship and this is another area which needs to be strengthened when a social worker is assisting a youth through the system toward self sufficiency. The youth are certainly experts on their own lives and should be included as partners when making decisions that will affect their futures.

High caseloads were established by the youth as a hindrance to positive relationships between youth and their social workers as well as a significant factor in agency operations. Reducing caseloads for youth social workers in the child welfare system is strongly recommended.

In the area of research, more youth focused research, directed at what is going right in the system for youth is recommended to establish best practices in this area of specialization. This type of qualitative research provides a deeper understanding of the youth's experience and empowers youth in the process.

Conclusions

This research provided a qualitative framework for what youth perceive as important in relationship to their social workers; competence, attention to their individual needs and advocacy. These characteristics are what youth see as essential in the process of their becoming self-sufficient adults by way of the child welfare system. It is important for social workers involved with youth to possess the skills necessary to engage youth in the process and to empower them to overcome the issues that brought them into the system, and at the same time, protecting them from any further trauma while they are in our care.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate in is designed to explore the social worker-client relationship with aging-out foster care youth. This study is being conducted by Melissa Myers under the supervision of Dr. Laurie A. Smith, Professor of Social Work. This study has been approved by the Social Work Institutional Review Board Subcommittee, California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study you will be asked to participate in an interview/focus group process, which will consist of several general questions and an opportunity for you to talk about your experiences with your social worker during your aging out process. The interview/focus group should take about 1 hour. All of your information will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researcher. Your name will not be reported with your information. As with any disclosure of a sensitive nature some risk is involved in terms of emotional reactions to the content of this interview/focus group and this researcher is skilled in group facilitation and crisis intervention should this arise. The potential benefits to sharing your story are gaining group identification and support. Each participant's story is important and it is this researcher's belief that sharing in a group experience is empowering. The study will be completed by June 15, 2006. Information regarding the completed study can be obtained by calling (909) 537-5184.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free not to answer any questions and withdraw at any time during this study without penalty. Refusal to participate will not affect your relationship with CYC in any way. In order to ensure the validity of the study, we ask that you do not discuss this study with other students or participants.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Laurie A. Smith at (909) 537-5501.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Place a check mark here

☐

Date: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Aging-Out Youth: An Inquiry into the Social Worker/Client Relationship

Debriefing Statement

This study you have just participated in was designed to gather data relating to your experiences and perceptions of aging out of the child welfare system. The relationship between youth and their social workers during such a crucial time in this process is being examined to inform best practices in this specialization. Your input is valuable and will contribute to the quality of the research and its product.

Thank you for collaborating in this process. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Melissa Myers or Professor Laurie A. Smith at (909) 537-5505 at the end of Spring Quarter of 2006.

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

What experiences did you have with social workers during your recent aging out process?

What were some of the positive aspects of these relationships?

What did they do well?

What changes could you recommend to bring about a better future for aging-out foster care youth?

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